

WORKING ON THE FRONT LINES; SHINING A LIGHT ON THE PROBLEM

On a snowy January night in 2010, a loud cell phone ring disturbed Randy Hunter's sleep around 2 a.m. Shaking off the cob webs from his slumber, Hunter walked into the kitchen of his Floyd County home and answered the call. He predicted someone was calling him about a meth-lab bust.

FBI Agent Donnie Kidd had called to alert Hunter, a Kentucky State Police detective that law enforcement in Virginia picked up James Marsillett II, a highly sought after fugitive from Kentucky, who had been on the run for three months after his indictment on major drug charges. The indictment was part of the largest drug sweep in Kentucky's history in October 2009.

Out of 518 people arrested and charged for prescription drug offenses, Marsillett faced the most serious charge — operating a continuing criminal enterprise. The offense carried a minimum of 20 years in prison.

Before Hunter could exhale, he received some discouraging news.

"I was told the local magistrate didn't feel he had the authority to detain Marsillett and he was going to be released," Hunter said.

Hunter, Kidd and Federal Prosecutor Roger West exchanged several phone conversations to work out a solution.

"We were definitely anxious because we knew the clock was ticking," Hunter said.

Hunter learned that Virginia law enforcement would hold Marsillett for a couple of hours in their police car if Hunter would immediately leave for Virginia to get Marsillett.

Hunter and a KSP trooper hopped in a cruiser and drove through blowing snow and into the morning hours to retrieve Marsillett.

That night is an example of what it was like working on the front lines of the prescription drug epidemic. Nights like those were not uncommon for West, Kidd and Hunter.

The three encountered the prescription drug problem on an intimate level with earlier cases involving Urgent Care facilities out of state. When those clinics closed, guys like Marsillett started sponsoring drug trips to a new destination.

"Hundreds of people visited Cincinnati and Philadelphia, but Florida was in the thousands," West said.

When the problem spilled into Florida and rogue pain clinics began handing out pills to Kentuckians like Halloween

candy, many law enforcement eyes looked to the trio for insight.

"It felt like my phone rang twenty-four, seven," said Hunter. "Everyone thought they had a federal case. I remember getting contacted in the middle of the night while I was visiting my uncle in Michigan."

"We got calls from [Appalachia] High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas districts in Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia asking us how we handled these cases," West said.

When asked by agency heads in Kentucky and Florida for advice, Kidd offered a concise recommendation.

"Don't ignore the problem," he told them. "It's not going away. It's only going to get bigger and bigger."

By the time Florida pill mills peaked between 2008 and 2009, well over half of the prescription narcotics on the streets in the eastern and central portions of the commonwealth came from Florida pain clinics, Hunter said.

Kidd added that streamlining communication between law enforcement in Kentucky and Florida was critical to address the problem, but it was challenging.

"We were seeing most of the street level dealers and [Drug Trafficking Organizations] here, but Florida was only dealing with the doctors," Kidd said. "So in Florida's defense, they couldn't really understand how big of a problem it was here."

Prior to the massive drug sweep in 2009, Kidd and Hunter invited Florida authorities to Kentucky to help serve arrest warrants for the roundup and give them a taste of the epidemic.

"I think it was a real eye opener for them," Kidd said. "It's one thing for them to hear us talk about it but for them to actually see it firsthand had to be quite an experience for them."

The work on the roundup helped strengthen the law enforcement relationship between the two states to create a more unified effort. However, Hunter said it may also have altered the paradigm of Florida officials.

"One of our main goals with the roundup was to bring the problem to light," Hunter said. "After the roundup, other Appalachian states began working with Florida authorities. I think we saw a reduction in the trips to Florida after that. It (the round up) helped create tighter restrictions from law enforcement and legislators." ■